

恋愛時代 (Love Times)
By 伊藤 梨子 (Konohara Narise)
Translated by Shirohane

Chapter 1

“I love you.”

“My apartment is to the left of the electricity pole across from here, after you walk straight down this road. Do you live in that mansion, Arita(有田) -san? We lived quite close by, didn’t we?”

The *kouhai* (someone with less experience, be it school or workplace. Usually translated as ‘younger classmate’, but in this case someone with less work experience) happily smiled as his pupils underneath the frameless eyeglasses narrowed a little. His eyes, which weren’t big to start with, narrowed like threads when he smiled. After getting off the train at the same station, they walked together because their way home was the same. The weather was terrible since the morning, so stars couldn’t be seen in the cloud-covered sky, and only streetlights faintly shone within cold air that held wetness.

It was the end of November, in which winter started to show itself. The *kouhai* who walked bent over, as if he were burdened by his body that easily reached 190cm and that was wrapped by blue-gray suit, sighed. One strand of neatly brushed hair fell near his ear. His large earlobes were faintly colored, be it because of the cold weather or because of the alcohol in his blood.

“It became quite cold. I heard that this winter will be much colder than the last year’s.”

“Oh, really?”

The wind that brushed his neck was cold than his thought, so Arita Manabu(有田 まなぶ) withdrew his neck unconsciously. His *kouhai*, who was more than 10cm taller than Arita, was also making his body smaller.

His hair that smoothly fell across his forehead got in his way, so Arita roughly pushed it up as he brushed it with his hand. His bangs grew when he just left them alone because it had been too bothersome to get them cut. When he had a lover, he had been glooming himself carefully, but when he broke up with her last summer, he stopped caring for his appearances as well.

A female co-worker who had been with them for three years quit because of her marriage, so they had a farewell party today. After hearing that they were headed to karaoke place, Arita made an excuse that “he had something to do” and left after eating. His *kouhai* Hirose Akihiro(広瀬 あきひろ) left with him, as if he were joining him.

He’s two years younger than Arita, so Hirose was 28 years old this year. Arita couldn’t help but acknowledge the speed of time’s passage as he thought about how it had been already 6 years since he taught him about their work with all his energy.

At the time that Hirose entered the company, their department wasn’t as big and they were in

charge of both paperwork and actual contracts, so they didn't separate their work into specific areas of expertise. Arita mostly worked with field works, but somehow he was appointed to educate Hirose, who specialized in desk works, and he taught him work man-to-man. Hirose was an old-fashioned and serious man who was quiet, but he was very clear of speech when he had to be. He was a *kouhai* who was hard to find one of these days.

There were three new workers who entered the company along with Hirose. Hirose was the worst in that he didn't know how to take the easy way out. Contrary to his relaxed face, he was a perfectionist. Arita was anxious himself, since he couldn't tell his relentless *kouhai* to just take it easy. He wondered if he couldn't be more crafty about his work.

But even though Hirose took his time, he definitely came up with results that answered to the times he spent. In the end, he was trusted more than the other workers who did the work easily.

They talked often the first 1-2 years. But their company policy changed midway so deskwork and field work were separated, and even though they used the same office, their superiors became different. When their department and type of work they did became all different, they had less chance to meet with each other, so naturally they stopped talking to each other.

3 years after he was admitted to the company, Hirose had been transferred to a branch company in the suburbs. He returned this year's July. Arita wondered if Hirose will be okay when he returned, since he seemed as relaxed as ever and he knew that while he was a skilled worker, he worked slowly. But contrary to his worries, Hirose resumed work immediately and became familiar with his work.

They brokenly resumed conversation about neutral talks of their world, and when he finally realized his surroundings, he saw his mansion right in front of him. Arita said at the corner of the road that turned into the narrow pathway, "Then, see you tomorrow", and Hirose carefully stopped him by saying, "Um..."

"I'm not drunk."

Sure footing, clear pronunciation, and cheerful conversation. Hirose definitely didn't seem drunk.

"You don't seem drunk."

Arita cocked his head to the side, wondering where that came out of nowhere. Hirose who had been lowering his eyes, as if he felt uncomfortable, raised his face.

"I love you."

A clear sentence that couldn't be replied with, "What do you love?" or "Who do you love?" Arita thought to himself, "It's bothersome." They were looking at each other, and Arita saw Hirose's serious eyes, so he couldn't laugh it off, nor could he just leave it be by pretending that he didn't hear. He didn't have anything to say, so he continued to stand. Hirose looked at Arita without moving, his face quite serious as if he were waiting for a reply.

"Then, please sleep well."

The voice overlapped the words that Arita finally managed to squeeze out. Hirose shyly smiled and ducked his head lightly, then he turned his back to Arita and walked away. He quickly walked away before he heard his obvious retort, *but you're a man*. Arita stood, confused out of his mind. Only after his turned back disappeared from his line of vision by turning the corner did he remember to be extremely angry.

"What the hell is wrong with him?!"

After he spat that out, Arita freely kicked the electricity pole to his right with his heel in a fit of anger.

Even when he returned to his mansion, Arita still felt disgusted. He wasn't so desperate that he had to hear 'I like you' kind of confession from a man. He roughly threw off his suit and stood in front of the mirror stationed in his closet. He quietly stared at his reflection. His neat hair had become messed up, so his bangs fell across his forehead childishly, but he definitely didn't look too young for his age. He couldn't be called handsome, but he looked okay; he looked like a normal twenty nine-years-old man. He lost a little weight because his eating schedule had been hectic lately, but he wasn't fragile. His body was a well-balanced, normal-looking body...

Arita lightly patted his cheeks with his palms and sighed deeply.

"Do I give off the aura that I'd like men, or have a face that men like or something?"

He became frightened of himself who mumbled these things, so he messed up his hair violently and ran into his bathroom.

Arita had a little brother who was seven years younger than him. "Had", because his brother was no longer in the family records. Last summer, his brother eloped with a 'man', and his father became so angry that he deleted him from the family registrar.

No matter what others say, Arita adored his little brother who was at an age where he followed him around, saying, "Big brother, big brother". His brother didn't have any special abilities, nor did he look especially good. He was a cheerful and sweet man who loved baseball and reading.

That normal brother of his became a college student and got himself a lover. He was a man who was one year younger than him in the same club. Arita doesn't know, either, who was attracted to whom first, and how they started to go out. But in the middle of going out, his brother seemed to have tired of the younger man and asked him to break up.

That's when the nightmare started. The younger man ignored the public eyes and chased after his brother who said he didn't want him. Often, he would hide out and wait in front of the house. Their mother became curious about the man's suspicious behavior and asked the little brother, and he confessed that he had been dating with that man.

Arita and his parents were really shocked that the person that his little brother had been going out with had been a man. However, they believed his words when he said he really wanted to break up with him, so Arita and his parents didn't blame his brother and stayed by his side, supporting him. The brother became mentally cornered by the man who seemed he would never give him up, and he stayed at home all day, not going outside at all. Arita and his parents became terribly worried

about the little brother who lost more weight every day. Arita couldn't just stand by and watch any longer, so he asked the man out to talk some sense into him. However, the man refused to listen to anything Arita had to say, and continued to repeat "Return him to me", even though his brother wasn't anyone's property.

In the end, they started to talk about notifying the police. However, one day, his brother left home after leaving one letter.

"I'm going to live with him."

That was it. He didn't say anything about where he was going, nor with whom. Arita and his parents were in a panic. They thought he had been dragged off by that man by force. Trembling in anger, his father forced his way into the apartment where the man was supposedly living.

His father came back home late, his lips tightly closed in fury. He completely ignored Arita and his mother, who wanted to hear about the situation. Two days later, his father deleted Arita's little brother from the Arita family registrar.

The incident with his brother wasn't the direct cause, but he had a somewhat trifling fight with his girlfriend whom he was dating with marriage in mind, and stupidly broke up with her. His brother running away from home and breaking up with his lover--at that time, one misfortune just followed another.

About 2 months after the little brother ran away from home, he suddenly showed up at Arita's mansion. He said he's going to move, and gave Arita his new apartment address and phone number. He wanted Arita to call him if anything should happen to him or their parents.

Arita stopped his brother from leaving after he was done with what he had to say, and invited him inside his home for a short talk.

"You said you hated him so much, so why are you trying live with that kind of man?"

Even at Arita's question, his brother didn't lift his lowered head. Arita asked him again and again why he made their father so angry, and after mumbling five times, he finally spoke.

"I... made him hear it."

"Hear it?"

"My voice when I, you know. I... knew dad was there, so I tried my best not to make any noises, but I just couldn't hold it in any more, so..."

When Arita realized that the "voice" was from when he was at the peak of having sex, he had goosebumps all over. His heart felt pained at the thought that his little brother was doing that kind of stuff with a man. However, somewhere in his heart, Arita still believed that "my brother is different".

"If... you're being threatened, or he's forcing himself on you in anyway, I'm going to do whatever it takes to help you, so..."

At Arita's worried voice, his brother laughed weakly and covered his face with his hands.

"It was a fate. It was going to turn out like this even before I was born.... Not to mention, I love him. I said I hated him because... I was scared of him. But even that was love, now that I think back on it."

Listening to his little brother, Arita wanted to throw up. He wondered if something was wrong with his brother, who said things like "fate" when he was talking about his relationship with a man. Arita couldn't understand the "brother who loved a man" no matter how hard he tried.

Will... Hirose chase him around, saying that he loves him? Arita became scared when he imagined that easy-going man changing his expression and stalking him.

At this age... He kept repeating that word, as if it became a habit. Why must he be worrying about such nonsense? Arita poured hot water all over his body and hoped against hoped that his kouhai's face, which stuck to his brain like a nightmare, will hurry and disappear.

Since it was after the weekend, the office suddenly became busy in the afternoon. The phone rang without stopping and people's voices overlapped here and there. A little apart from the chaos, Arita was looking at the new planning sheets and related documents. But he couldn't pay attention at all, so from a while back, for every three pages he read of the related documents at his right side, he had to go back and reread two pages.

Arita knew very well that he was nervous, and the reason why. It wasn't because of the noise nor the chaos. He just felt grossed out. He was just unbearably grossed out by the "gaze" that continued to silently focus on him.

"The director is upset with something, isn't he?"

A male office worker sitting near Arita's desk softly whispered to a female worker by his side. Normally he would have let that go without thinking much about it, but he was clearly aware of it this time.

"There is a limit to my patience!"

Arita roughly threw the documents on top of his desk. Sudden silence descended followed by that noise. Everyone nervously looked at Arita's expression. Arita glanced at his surroundings before he stood up and quickly left the room.

He wouldn't be able to bear it if he didn't try to relieve his stress. Arita bought a canned coffee from a vending machine at the end of the hallway, and he drank half of it, watching the view downstairs through a dirty window.

As soon as he ran away from that gaze, he felt like the anxiety spread through his system drained away.

Arita started to notice Hirose's obvious stare the day after he confessed to him. Right after that incident, Arita had to bear through Hirose's gaze all day. But day after day, Hirose's gaze didn't

leave Arita. "To be stared at by Hirose who said he loved him" became stressful to Arita in many ways.

Just when Arita sighed and was about to finish off his coffee, his patience completely snapped.

"Hirose!"

When he yelled his name loud enough to echo through the hallways, Hirose straightened his posture from his slightly slouching one, as if he were startled. He turned around and smiled when he realized who was calling him. He ran to his side.

"What is it?"

"Follow me."

Arita gestured roughly with his chin. He tossed his half-remaining coffee down the garbage can and walked to the middle of the hallway. When he got on the elevator, Hirose followed him. He pressed the button to the 18th floor, which was the top floor. The elevator started to ascend quietly, but Arita closed his mouth with a faceless expression and didn't say anything. Hirose noticed his senpai's behavior and quietly looked at Arita, looking troubled.

After he checked to make sure it wasn't locked, he opened the door. The conference room was a big room that took up about half of the roof. No one used it much except on few meetings in which all departments gathered together for a conference. Since they had a end-of-the-month meeting just the day before yesterday, as he thought no one was at the conference room.

When he entered, Hirose also came in. The southern part of conference room was completely made out of glass, but curtains completely blocked out the lights, so the room was dark.

"Hirose."

Arita turned around after mildly calling him. He glared up at his kouhai who bent his tall body slightly. Hirose, who had been following Arita from behind, answered "Yes" when his name had been called.

"Do you know what I want to say?"

Hirose cocked his head and thought.

"...Is this about the event the week after next?"

Enough acting like he didn't know what he was talking about! Arita violently slapped the top of the table.

"This is not about work. It's about a personal matter!"

Hirose's face suddenly became bright red. From his lowered head, his ears could be seen dyed red.

"If you stare at me so obviously, I can't just sit there, either. I can't even concentrate on my work

because I feel uncomfortable. Let me make it clear; you're being annoying."

Hirose didn't lift his lowered head.

"Are you even working? You're just staring at me all day."

He meanly muttered on purpose, looking into Hirose's lowered face.

"Did I... stare at you that often, Arita-san?"

A small voice. Arita shortly laughed, his shoulders shaking.

"It's so "obvious" that it's strange that other people didn't notice!"

When he spat that out, Hirose clenched his hands into fists tightly.

"...I am so sorry for making you feel disgusted."

His voice sounded agonized.

"I did not mean it at all. I should have realized that I am making you uncomfortable sooner. I sincerely apologize. I'm slow with things like that, so..."

Hirose bowed again and again to unbelieving Arita, sincerely apologizing. Arita's anger, which had reached to the exploding limits, slowly abated.

When he thought about it rationally, Arita wondered if he might have overreacted with Hirose because his brother's lover's image was so strong in his mind. Like heterosexual relationships had many forms, there are many types of guys who liked guys. There are annoying guys who disregarded everything and messed everything up until he got what he wanted, like his brother's lover, but there are quiet types like Hirose who would "only look and not touch".

"I really am very sorry."

After Hirose apologized for the millionth time, Arita strangely felt sorry for him even though he was the one who made him like that, so he said, "It's fine now."

Hirose finally lifted his head and gave out a relieved sigh. Arita felt calmed, too, so they've finished talking about the "uncomfortable gaze" for now.

After they came out of the conference room and were waiting for the elevator going down, Hirose standing by his side dropped his head down.

"I remembered it when I was returning here back in July. I was so happy... that I could meet you everyday from now on, so I'd always find myself suddenly staring at you numbly..."

Arita frowned when he heard him say "July". He started to be troubled by Hirose's gaze the day after he had confessed to him. Can it be... that Hirose had continuously looked at him ever since July? He might have looked at him from way before, even though he just noticed it now because

Hirose had been on his mind after the confession. Looking at him THAT way...

"Since when did you started to like me?"

He asked brusquely, not looking at Hirose's face.

"Even if you ask me, 'since when'..."

"Since when?"

At the business-like tone that sounded like he was having an argument with him, Hirose hesitated before he opened his mouth.

"I am not quite sure. I thought right after I entered this company that you're a wonderful person. It was after I got moved to the other branch that I realized that my feelings for you had been romantic, but even at that time, I wasn't quite sure of my feelings. I think I finally became certain when I came back here..."

Arita couldn't stop looking amazed as he pointed at Hirose's nose with his index finger.

"Then Hirose, are you saying you *think* you've loved me ever since you entered this company 6 years ago?"

"Well, I guess that would be the conclusion."

"How stupid. It's a waste of time; feeling that way towards a man."

Hirose sadly lowered his eyes at Arita's blunt tone, cringing, as he muttered excuse-like words.

"I'm not saying that I was faithful only to you all this time. I thought some women were quite nice, and I did go out with them few times, but in the end, after all..."

To make a comparison, his brother's lover was a carnivore and Hirose was a herbivore. After he understood that he was a harmless man who would never eat him up, Arita teasingly asked:

"So how does it feel to love a man?"

Hirose slightly backed off at Arita's ironical gaze that glanced up at him.

"Excuse me?"

"I have no experience of that sort, that's why. In the end, do you think about wanting to hold me, or wanting to be held?"

Hirose became bright red and lowered his head. His tightly closed lips that wouldn't let even one word of affirmation or dissent escape looked pathetic somehow, so Arita started to feel uncomfortable and closed his mouth. He silently glared at the red lamp that indicated the movements of the elevator, wondering if the elevator would come soon.

"I'm a slow person."

Arita turned around, wondering what he was talking about, and found Hirose looking at him seriously.

"You might have forgotten about this, but you've told me before that I need twice as much time in a day as other people. You're completely right. Even though other people can finish something in a day, I need at least two days. It just happens when I continue to worry about it and grope my way through it."

"Ah... Well."

He knew that there wasn't any cigarettes, but he lightly patted his shirt pocket unconsciously. It felt flat.

"So... When I started to have you on my mind, Arita-san, I kept thinking about it continuously. Just what is this feeling? In the end I couldn't find out the reason no matter how much I thought about it, but... Still, I wanted to see you, and wanted to talk to you more than anyone else. I confessed to you because I have finally sorted out my feelings."

The awaited elevator finally came, so Arita quickly got on and pressed the button for the 7th floor. Hirose stood diagonally from Arita. Arita strangely felt anxious about the slowness of the floor indicator.

"That was a lie."

Arita did not turn to look at Hirose.

"Saying that I sorted out my feelings... That's a lie. I became really anxious when I heard from the girl in my team that you had a girlfriend, realizing that you were at an age when you can get married any day now. Unlike before, nowadays I don't really have an opportunity to talk to you, either. I thought if I said something, you'd pay more attention to me. But of course no one would be happy to get a confession of love from a man. I'm sorry about that."

If he had just let it go, that might have been the end of that confession. Hirose's hope had only been a confession that had been whispered like a sigh. The reason why he had overreacted so much to it was... after all, because at the bottom of his feelings, Arita had an example of his little brother...

Arita called Hirose to make his feelings clear to him, but seeing him with his shoulders drooping, Arita felt guilty as if he bullied him on purpose. Inside the descending elevator, Arita had a feeling of uneasiness that enveloped his body more than Hirose, so he couldn't say anything.

Chapter 2

[Hirose-san is a nice person, but]

Arita unconsciously paid closer attention when he heard the name "Hirose". The source of the conversation was a newbie who had just joined the office workers this year. He was a easy-going man who only knew how to talk well and think quickly to get out of his problems. Arita didn't dislike him, but he avoided his type.

After they succeeded in a rather big event, both field workers and office workers were finished with all their work. It had been 2 weeks since he had called Hirose and warned him. He didn't feel the repellent gaze upon him anymore, but the incident left a scar in Arita's heart. He would've been creeped out if Hirose came and sat next to him today, too, but Hirose didn't show up at the small bar they rented out.

[Even today, Hirose-san didn't come because he said he had some work left. He's so rigid~. He could just do it tomorrow, you know.]

The newbie was facing Arita across a long table at the party. He was pretty drunk, and he took advantage of the chaotic atmosphere to wrap his arm around a girl's shoulders while he rambled on.

[He'd politely teach me if I ask him something, and he'd even humble himself to someone like me. I think he's a good person, but to the point of making him look retarded. I know he works really hard, but he's mad slow. He's always ②Hey, Mr. Turtle③mode. He'd do the extra work until almost ten. I'd never be able to keep up with that.]

I know, the girl sitting next to him giggled. The more he listened, the more irritated Arita became. It wasn't that he was standing up for him, but he couldn't stand to listen to some no-good newbie babbling whatever he wanted about Hirose who worked so diligently. Arita emptied alcohol contained in a tiny China cup.

[I'm the one who trained Hirose, but from the beginning his work sense was pretty good. Compared to other three, he never made mistakes in his documents, nor did he ever mistype anything.]

[Oh, Team Leader, were you listening? How mean~]

The newbie seemed to realize the intentional thorn hidden in his words. He gave a troubled laugh while he glanced up at Arita sideways.

[I wasn't particularly bad-mouthing Hirose-san. Please don't tell on him.]

If that's not bad-mouthing, what the hell is that. He seemed to notice that Arita's cup was empty since he quickly picked up the bottle and poured out his drink. Arita's colleague sitting nearby started talking to him, so while he was engaged in conversation with him, others seemed to have returned to talking about Hirose because he occasionally heard his name.

[He might lack some excitement as a date, but a person like Hirose-san is great to get married to.]

[What? How come?] The newbie asked, surprised. The girl placed her index finger against her lips briefly.

[Because he's really sweet. He won't cheat on you, and he's hard-working. He's probably really

good to his woman.]

The newbie slightly wrinkled his brows.

[But won't he be boring as a man?] He ironically asked, and the girl meaningfully smiled.

[Hirose-san said his hobby his photography.]

[You mean those weird ones-?]

At the newbie's condescending tone, the girl lifted up her eyebrows angrily.

[He said they're scenaric photographs. Whenever he has a break, he said he'd drive by himself to mountains or sea and take pictures as a hobby. That's really cool.]

Was his hobby photography... I think I heard about that before. Arita cocked his head, sipping at his drink that had completely cooled.

[Oh!]

His colleague turned to look at him.

[What is it, Arita.]

[No, nothing.]

He suddenly remembered. When Hirose was still a newbie... There was a time when he was helping him out with the extra work. It was at the end of June, and depressing rain showers continued. Every day work ended past 11, and even weekends were filled with seminars and left-over work. They returned home only to sleep. Hirose never whined about anything before, but in front of Arita, Hirose said complaints that were atypical of him.

Hirose's profile looked wane as he sighed over the keyboard. He seemed really tired.

[This is the hardest part of your career. There's nothing you can do.]

As he comforted the crest-fallen newbie and taught him work, Arita sympathized deep in his heart. This was the hardest period for a newly accepted workers. Arita had that experience, too. In Arita's case, he had been so stressed out that he developed ulcers in addition, but...

Hirose sighed while drinking the coffee that Arita handed to him.

[I became sick and tired of just going back and forth between work and home every single day. I'd like to drive my car to relieve my stress, but I have absolutely no time to do so. It's June right now, so Kurono's mums should be a sight by now.]

[Kurono should be pretty far away. Doesn't it take four hours by car?]

When Arita asked that, Hirose tilted his head.

[That's true, but if there is no traffic, you can get there by three. Last year I went to see them with my college friends, but it was raining that day so I had so much trouble making sure my camera stayed dry.]

[Camera?]

[I was in the Photography Club back in college.]

[Oh... So you take nude pictures and stuff?]

Hirose laughed at Arita's question.

[Depending on the person, their subject is different. There WAS one who specialized in female nudes, but I liked scenery photographs. Usually I went to the mountains or rivers and took pictures of only those.]

[...I used to camp out a lot, too, but recently I haven't been to anywhere at all.]

[Why don't we go somewhere together when we have some time off? Mihirodake or something.]

Hirose gently smiled at Arita.

[Sounds great. We should go.]

He lightly said **Let's go**, but it wasn't like he specifically thought about where to go with Hirose. He just answered **Let's go** because that seemed like the right thing to answer in that atmosphere.

That's where the conversation ended, and Hirose didn't ask him again, and Arita totally forgot about that conversation. If they didn't bring this topic up, he wouldn't have even remembered. Arita bitterly smiled, thinking that Hirose's plans did bring some effect. Arita definitely started to pay more attention to Hirose than before.

Even though the feelings were completely different from "attraction"...

It was only for a brief period that they could relax because the event ended. Not even a week passed before they became busy with end-of-the month summaries, so November passed by in a chaos. Recently the Sun started to set quickly, so as soon as 5 PM passed when all works were due, outside started to darken. After six it became completely dark. Arita realized this one day when he returned to the office. He noticed show windows on the streets that were decorated with red and green all of a sudden.

It has been one month since he had talked to Hirose at the conference room. After that, they have never spoken to each other.

Arita was avoiding Hirose as much as he could without making things awkward, and Hirose didn't approach or talk to Arita needlessly. Calling him up and talking to him had quite an effect, as he didn't bother him with burdensome gazes, either.

At the first weekend of December, when trains became most clogged because of rush hour, Arita sighed for umpteenth time as he stamped the presented document. When he handed the document over, the female worker who received it worriedly glanced at Arita's face.

[Aren't you overworking yourself, sir?]

Arita wondered if his face looked so tired that even others would worry about him, and lightly hit his cheeks with ends of his hands.

[It's been so busy lately. But I'm okay. It's not a big deal.]

That kind of faking-strength did not seem to convince her, since the female worker didn't budge from Arita's desk.

[It's been concerning me since this morning, but Team Leader, you look so pale. Shouldn't you better go back home for today?]

It's been already two hours since work hours were over. The remaining workers could be counted on one hand. Come to think of it, the work he was doing now could wait until Monday. Arita bitterly smiled and placed the remaining documents in his desk drawer. The watching female worker sighed, looking relieved.

[I'm sorry for worrying you. The end-of-the-month things to tie up and playing golf and drinking with clients during the weekends left no time for me to rest at all.]

[Must be hard for you.]

[I have to go towards Hikago area tomorrow as well...]

The female worker frowned a little.

[Clients again?]

[Oh no, it's a personal business. Recently my uncle's health had worsened.... He's only in his fifties, but I think his time is near. I was going to go visit him at the hospital tomorrow, but my car's going through an inspection and I couldn't manage to borrow a car. Just thinking about being shaken up in a train for three, four hours, going back and forth, makes me heavy-hearted.]

The girl seems to come to herself when she heard the short chime indicating that it was half past seven, and she stated **Don't push yourself** before she returned to her seat. He had no intention of complaining to someone else, but he said such useless things. He was probably psychologically weakened because he was so tired. Arita quickly gathered up his things and said good-byes to the remaining workers before he hurriedly left the office. When the elevator arrived at the ground floor and he reached the automatic gates at the company building's entrance, Arita naturally stopped.

The streets were faintly lit with street lights. The leaves of the trees lining the streets widely shook. Passing woman's long hair wildly blew in the wind. He thought about having to walk to the station in this fierce wind and taking the crowded train, tossed here and there. Just thinking about it made him sick.

When he made up his mind and took a step forward, someone called his name. The automatic door swung wide open, and then quickly closed. The brown leaf that flew in when the door opened made crackling noises by Arita's foot.

Hirose was inputting data in front of his keyboard until the moment Arita was leaving the office.

Hirose walked towards Arita, holding onto his coat with one hand. His shoulders shook as he took deep breaths.

[I heard what you were talking about before. Tomorrow... You're going to Hikago, right? I was about to take some photos at Matsune Mountain at Hikago. If it's okay with you, why don't we go together? I shall drive.]

If this wasn't Hirose--or rather, even if it was Hirose, if it was before the confession he would have gladly accepted. But... Arita didn't say anything for few moments and quietly looked at his *kouhai's* face. Outside the sound of blustery wind could be heard, but in the dimly lit entrance where only two of them stood, silence settled like a water about to overflow.

[Did you even look at the weather forecast for tomorrow? It's going to rain.]

At Arita's words, Hirose tightly closed his lips. He loudly sighed, as if he purposefully wanted him to hear it.

[Why the hell do you think I'm going all the way to Hikago.]

[I heard... it was to visit your relative at the hospital.]

[Yes, I'm going to visit someone who's going to die soon. I'm different from someone like you, who's just going to go there and have fun.]

His tone was mean. He knew that Hirose was using photography as an excuse because he wanted to give him a ride, but he wasn't going to let him get away with it. Not to mention, Arita was so dreadfully tired that he didn't have the presence of mind to refuse Hirose in a considerate manner.

[Can you be more thoughtful now?]

Hirose lowered his pale face. No, he might have just looked that way because it was semi-darkness.

[...I'm sorry for overstepping my boundaries and speaking up. Excuse me while I go before you.]

Saying that in a thin, small voice, Hirose left the entrance. When the door opened a strong gust of wind came in, so Arita unconsciously closed his eyes. And when he opened his eyes again, Hirose was already out of his sight.

As the weather forecast predicted, Saturday that got buried in the valley between chilly airs succumbed to rain showers. Pretty newscaster smiled at Arita, saying that some places might become sunny again towards the afternoon, but it didn't help him. It was still depressing. Continuous tiredness called sleep, but when he slept he had nightmares. When Arita finally snapped awake and hurriedly grabbed the alarm clock above his head, he had already slept more than two hours than the time he had intended to wake up.

He rushed washing up and wore a thin black sweater and brown pants. He checked the train schedule that he had brought home yesterday once again. Already all the morning trains were gone, so he decided to hurry a little and eat at the restaurants near the station, and then take the first afternoon train.

He put on the coat and opened the front gates. However, pouring of rain made Arita freeze. It was a terrible rain storm that blurred even the spot right in front of him. It was practically a water pillar.

[I have no luck.]

Muttering to himself, he took the umbrella that he kept next to his front door. He briefly considered taking the taxi, but it was ridiculously short distance between his home and the station. When he stepped out determinedly, even that made the bottom of his brown pants wet by soaking up the rain.

He gathered himself into a bundle and walked, carefully avoiding the water puddles. But that worked only for few minutes. He hadn't walked even twenty meters before bottom half of his pants were so wet that they wouldn't pull away from his legs.

A white car that approached him from behind slowed down when it passed Arita, and then stopped right in front of him. It honked lightly. Arita didn't realize that it was honking at him.

[Arita-san]

The window rolled down, and someone waved at him from inside.

[Are you heading to the station?]

Hirose looked at him as if he didn't care that the widely opened window let in the huge raindrops that wet his face and shirt. Arita slowly walked to the car and held his umbrella near it unconsciously.

[This is some rain. I'll take you to the station; please get in.]

If it didn't rain, if he didn't feel depressed about visiting his sick relative, if he didn't have the nightmare that woke him up like that this morning, Arita had no intention of getting on Hirose's car that would make him feel so uncomfortable. But he felt so pathetic while hugging a mountain of bad feelings, getting soaked while he creped to the station, so Arita didn't want to walk in the rain any longer.

[Sorry... But you just have to take me to the station.]

When Arita said that while getting in the car, Hirose gave him a small smile.

[What a rain.]

Water ran down at the tip of the folded umbrella and made a small puddle by Arita's feet.

[I was heading to the bookstore near the station. It's within walking distance, but I didn't want to get wet since it was raining so much.]

The wiper busily pushed away the water that flowed down the front glass, left and right. Arita numbly stared ahead of him. When he sat still like that without moving, he felt the wet cloth that became cold. Hirose seemed to mind Arita trembling, because he turned on the heater.

The road to the station was busy with traffic, and inside of the car became warm. Arita had no intention of doing so, but he closed his eyes briefly.

Arita suddenly opened his eyes at a light bump. He sleepily looked around him, and then he became startled when he realized that he was still in the car, next to Hirose. It took him few minutes to figure out where he was and what he was doing. He was still drunk with sleep. It should've been only to the station, but the scenery that the car was running in was unfamiliar. Only when he looked up at the road sign, he realized that they had passed the station a long time ago and they were travelling across the south road, off to the right towards the sea.

[Hey.]

[Oh, did you open your eyes?]

The light changed to green, and the car started to move again. Hirose was facing in front of him, sounding nonchalant.

[Did I not tell you that I just wanted to get to the station?]

As if noticing the anger imbedded in his tone, Hirose's profile tightly closed his mouth. Arita tsked and rested his cheek against his right hand.

[It was also my bad for falling asleep, but why didn't you wake me up at the station, sheesh... I guess there's no use complaining at this point. Let me off at the station nearest here. I'll take the train from there.]

[It takes 2 hours to get to Hikago by express. Not to mention, this area only has small stations, so express won't stop by, so no matter what you'd have to take local. That'll take about three hours. I have nothing else to do, so can't I take you there? I'll just think of it as a relaxing drive.]

He had been refused in a roundabout way. He told him, you don't have to drive me, so he should've just obeyed him and brought him to the station... Arita started to become really angry with his opponent who refused to do as he was told.

[I told you, I don't want to!]

Arita started to feel irritated. It felt like the fact that he had been picked up and he had been brought all the way out here were all planned. He really wanted to go to the station. That was it. He didn't want to do something like driving around with Hirose. From now on, for over one hour they'll be alone. Just thinking about what Hirose would talk about during that period made chills run up his spine.

[Stop the car. I don't care how long it takes. I'm going to take the train.]

He was the one insisting that he'd take him, so he could just let him be and ignore something like Hirose. But Arita was scared. If Hirose said one word about liking him or loving him or whatever, he felt like he would beat him up to death. In the rain, like a stubborn child, Arita kept repeating, **Stop the car**.

[...You hate it that much?]

Hirose suddenly muttered. It's not even the problem of hating or whatever. Then... Just what made him so disgusted? Arita couldn't describe his feelings fluently, so he closed his mouth.

Awkward silence passed. Arita turned his head and looked out the left window, as if ignoring the driver. But the pouring rain made outside scenery blurred like messed up watercolor, so it couldn't take away his boredom.

The word **Worst Sunday** crossed his mind. Or was it **Saturday**? Starting from this morning, he had a bad feeling. He had a really crappy dream, too. The nightmare that he hadn't had for few years now suddenly popped up today. Thinking about what his dream was about, Arita's feelings became even more down.

It was a dream about the time when he got rejected by the girl he liked. She wasn't beautiful, but she was a cheerful, easy-going child. They happened to sit next to each other and started to talk to each other naturally.

They liked the same books. They liked the same music. Just that was enough for them to have endless conversations. For hours and hours, they would be in their own world. Classroom after school, park next to the station, it didn't matter where it was as long as they could talk together. When his friend asked, [Do you like her?], he thought he might. I like her, I really do like her. He suddenly became inflamed with the idea of **I might be in love with her**, so he confessed to her that **I love you** as if he were feverish.

At Arita's words she lowered her troubled face and fidgeted with hem of her sailor uniform's white scarf. At the end of autumn, edge of river was filled with golden blanket of pampas grass that wavered gracefully in the wind.

She started to say something, and then stopped. In the end she said,

How does it feel to love someone? I don't know. It's really fun talking to you, but I don't think that's the same thing as love.

He got refused because she wasn't sure. He was sure that she'd say OK, so Arita had announced to all of his friends that he was going to confess to her. His feelings were in chaos, mixed up with his own pride and shame towards his friends. Arita was angry.

The confession created a small distance between the two of them. A small but definite distance, like the space between two desks. It became awkward and he became frightened of the silence that he never felt before, so they started to talk less and less, and in the end they just stopped talking to each other. But conversely he started to want her more and more as the distance between two of them increased, so Arita thought he couldn't bear it.

He didn't want to talk to her. He wanted her as his own. Arita definitely became aware of the love, of the beast inside of him. I want to be with her, I want to touch her. But he couldn't speak his true feelings. Being refused was close to terrifying him.

Meanwhile, she became someone else's. Did she feel the love to him, that she couldn't feel towards Arita? Glaring at her being all excited and caring about her appearances, Arita thought she was being idiotic.

After school, in the classroom, Arita happened to see her kissing with him. That day, Arita came home and ripped up every single book he owned except his textbooks, and smashed up his records. He dumped everything in the trashcan and at the empty feeling that crushed up his heart, he cried a little. He thought he was stupid.

The dream usually ended at the scene where he started to cry. The fact that he was still having that dream might mean that he was still not free of **that love**. Definitely, that was the first and last time that he felt so strongly, so close to tears. After that he dated several people, but he had already become somewhat smarter, so even when they broke up Arita wouldn't do something like

hugging his pillow and crying his eyes out.

¶May I stop the car?¶

Hirose suddenly asked. Arita was sure that he brought him to the station, so he nodded. But Hirose stopped his car in the empty lot attached to the huge storage center along the shorelines. He parked his car and left his wipers running. Hirose leaned against the handle and stared beyond his front glass. Only dark grey sea stretched out in front of his eyes, and beyond that it faded out to light green shadow so that one could only see the end of the horizon.

¶I guess today's no good, after all.¶

He muttered in a small voice.

¶I'm sorry for taking up your time when you're in a hurry.¶

Hirose started his car again. In the end, until they reached the hospital about one hour later, neither Hirose nor Arita spoke much.

Arita kept telling him that he just had to take him to the Hikago station, but Hirose kept asking Arita the hospital's name, and he stubbornly ignored Arita's words by saying ¶But still...¶, and brought him all the way to the hospital entrance. To Hirose who parked his car near the entrance, Arita had no choice but to thank him.

¶Sorry about that.¶

It was an uncomfortable debt that Arita didn't want. Even if it was the worst drive in his life, Hirose ended up driving the car for over two hours just for Arita.

¶I'm the one who's sorry about being stubborn.¶

It was a weird conversation. Just hearing it, you wouldn't know who drove whom.

¶How are you going to return?¶

Hirose asked when Arita touched the door lock to get off the car.

¶I'm going to return by the train.¶

¶I shall wait here.¶

¶I'm fine.¶

He was starting to be really annoyed, so that's what he said, but Hirose still clung to him tenaciously.

¶I have to go back anyway, so that's why I'm offering to do that.¶

Arita pulled away from the door lock and hunched up.

¶...I don't know when I'm going to be returning. It'll be boring for you to wait hours and hours, and I don't want you to do that.¶

¶That doesn't matter at all; I shall wait. If... you... hate me that much, then you don't have to talk to me, and you may just sleep on our way back.¶

If you know I hate you that much, then why don't you just go back by yourself already! Arita was already beyond being angry at clinging Hirose; at this point he started to feel amused.

¶So... what's that. You're going to take good advantage of me sleeping and do naughty things to me or something?¶

Arita muttered, condescending smirk on his lips. Hirose's expression suddenly froze.

¶I'd never do something like that to you.¶

A strong denial. Arita also realized right away that ¶his words were too much. He didn't really think that Hirose would do something like that. He was so persistant that he put his foot in his mouth accidentally.

¶Anyway, go ahead alone. Thanks for today.¶

Saying that, Arita got off the car, as if running away. The rain had eased off somewhat compared to this morning, but it was still strong. He didn't want to waste even the time to open his umbrella, so he ran to the hospital entrance. In his hurry he nearly crashed into the hunched, elderly lady who was on her way out, so Arita hurriedly moved away to the right.

For the first time today, he thought it was a good thing that it was raining today. No one thought it was strange, even if he ran away. He took a deep breath, and Arita slowly entered the hospital.

It did concern him though, after all, so he turned back just once to look at him. He saw a white car standing all by itself in the parking lot right in front of the building. But he couldn't see Hirose's face all the way from here.

Chapter 3

Inside of hospitals all look the same. They always had white walls with clean linoleum floor that didn't allow even one speck of dust. The smell of antiseptics was suffocating.

After confirming his uncle's room number with the receptionist, Arita finally arrived at his intended room and lightly sighed. In comparison to depressing darkness of the hallways, the room was much much brighter. That was perhaps thanks to the huge window on the southern wall. His uncle was placed next to the window in the room intended for four patients. He sat on his bed with his legs crossed. He seemed occupied playing chess by himself. Until Arita was standing right next to him, his uncle did not tear his eyes away from the board. As if he noticed another person's presence, the uncle finally lifted his face and when he recognized Arita, he brightly smiled.

"Hey, Manabu. Thanks for coming. Hurry and take a seat."

Arita sat down on the round chair offered to him. His uncle, who turned fifty this year, hurt his nerves in a car accident in his younger days and was unable to walk without a cane. He had always been fine on his own, but before summer, his body condition became pretty bad so he had been hospitalized. Tests gave him a diagnosis of liver cancer. It was pretty far along and was spread all the way to his lungs, so the doctor told the family that he had a year to live at the most. Arita's father told Arita that his uncle knew about his own condition, too.

His uncle had always been a bright and cheerful man. He was very fashionable and paid twice as much attention to his clothing compared to others, so he always looked great. He had clear-cut look like a foreign movie star, and he was lithe and tall. Uncle always had a beautiful woman by his side. He went through girls like he changed clothes, but his uncle never tried to start a family with one of them.

"Long time no see. I'm relieved to see you looking so well, Uncle."

Arita loved his uncle, and he often visited him when he was young. Uncle patiently spent time with even small child like Arita. However, as he got older and he entered junior high, then high school, he started to spend more time with his friends. By the time he became an adult he had became quite distanced from him. Their most recent meeting before this was 4 years ago, on the third week after his grandmother had passed away.

Last month, when he had visited his hometown after a long absence, Arita heard about his uncle from his father. He became quite depressed after hearing that someone he knew well had less than a year to live. However, his uncle in front of him didn't show even an ounce of such desperate circumstances. He had always been a thin person, but he became even more skinny and his eyes had sunk in. His face became pale as well. However, that did not stop his uncle's natural cheerful personality.

Their conversation jumped around: stories about work, about their family. While talking, the uncle murmured, as if he suddenly remembered, "Come to think of it, last time Eiichi(井口) came by."

Arita couldn't hide his surprise at the abrupt mention of his little brother's name.

"Eiichi...?"

Uncle stole a glance at Arita's face. "He said he had business around here and came for a visit with his boyfriend."

"Oh, really."

Arita couldn't help bitterly smiling at his little brother who had no common sense. Who the hell goes around introducing his same-sex lover? When Arita lowered his face and became silent, his distressed uncle added, "You didn't know?"

"No... I was aware of it."

"You scared me because you suddenly stopped talking. Well, to tell you the truth, I was surprised when he introduced the guy to me as his lover. Recently I heard about such things often, but I had

no idea that my nephew would be like that. But wouldn't it be okay if he's happy with it? He told me that your father knew about it, too, but he must have raised hell."

"Yes, well..."

his uncle crossed his arms and sighed. He wrinkled his forehead, making a complicated expression. "It must be really hard on Older Brother, since his thinking's hardened. I think it's fine as long as they're happy together, but I guess it's different when you're directly related."

Arita couldn't understand how his uncle was trying to understand his little brother. If he honestly said, "That's disgusting," Arita would have accepted it. But his uncle said to just "leave them alone." Arita told himself that Uncle's opinions were only because this was strictly other people's business. He thought about the man who had brought him all the way to this hospital.

"You don't seem really prejudiced about this kind of issue, Uncle. I am bearing with it because it is my brother, but if it had been anyone else... For example, if it had been one of my friends, I have no idea if I can still hang out with him the same way."

Honestly speaking, after he heard that he "liked him," he couldn't get along with him normally. Even if he had his brother's case in mind, his phobia was abnormal. It would have been so much better if he could have been more mature and ignored him like it was no big deal, but he couldn't even do that.

"Prejudice, huh?" Uncle muttered while poking his cheek with his thumb and shifting his gaze. "Of course, unlike my brother, my junior and senior high school were all-boy schools. There were guys who liked other guys, and it was accepted as a norm that there would be guys like that. There were always at least one cute guy in each year, and even though I knew he was a boy, when I passed by him I would feel excited. I thought it was something like that. I do prefer women after all, but still."

Uncle rubbed the his thin fingertips while sighing. "Eiichi is a serious boy, so I'm sure he's suffering a lot. When I think about that, I feel really sorry for him. I'd like to fall in passionate love at least once in my life too, no matter what form of love it is. At this point it's a useless ramble of an old man, but anyway." His uncle laughed. He had always been surrounded by so many women, but his uncle was saying that he had never been in love.

"Eiichi aside, what's going on with you, Manabu? You're thirty now, right? It's a good age to have a woman or two that you are having a serious relationship with."

"Well, one of these days," Arita trailed off. Uncle patted Arita's shoulder a bit strongly.

"To me, you and Eiichi were always like my own kids. It's not possible for Eiichi, but I'm putting my hopes up for you." Laughing, his uncle suddenly dropped his gaze as if thinking. "Oh yeah. When Older Brother came by last time, I told him to forgive Eiichi already. After I heard that he had that argument with Eiichi, it kept worrying me. It's best to get rid of stuff like hatred. While you have such big worries, it's hard to rest in peace even if you have to die."

His uncle mentioned death without any hesitation. Arita's body withdrew as if he was forced to face the reality in front of him. Certainly, even if there may be few months difference, in a very short time, his uncle will no longer exist. "Even God can't tell which side is correct or incorrect. If

you don't forgive... and one of the sides die with blame still left in their heart, the one who is still alive wouldn't be able to bear it."

"Mr. Arita," a young nurse called his uncle's name from the entrance. When her eyes met Arita's, she smiled and lightly lowered her head. She approached the uncle's bed while pushing a wheelchair along.

"I see you have a visitor. It's still time for your examination soon, though," she regretfully said.

"It's already that time? Oh, you're right." Uncle glanced at the clock near his bed. "Manabu, I'm sorry for making you come all this distance today. It must have taken you so long. Say hi to Older Brother for me, too."

"Okay."

With the nurse's help, Uncle moved his seat to the wheelchair.

"Ms. Mita, is it still raining outside? Recently my eyes haven't been so good."

When his uncle started a conversation, the young nurse who looked to be in her twenties glanced outside, then smiled. "It has just stopped raining. It's like the incredible storm just now was a lie."

"That's good, Manabu. Careful on your way back. If you have the time, come see me again." His uncle raised his thin arm and grinned.

When he looked outside the window on the hallway, as the nurse said the rain had stopped. The blue sky seemed to be denying the huge rainstorm that raged moments ago.

The leaves reflected light and dropped lingering water drops, but no one would be able to believe that there have been torrents of rain just now.

When he passed the person carrying an umbrella at the entrance, Arita remembered his own and hurriedly went back to the umbrella station.

Right in front of the parking lot, there was a lone white car parked in the same position as the time when Arita had arrived. Already it had been almost two hours since Arita had entered the hospital. As he had said, Hirose had been waiting for Arita. Whenever Hirose popped into his thoughts Arita had hoped that he had left, but there was also a stray thought somewhere in his heart that had hoped that he hadn't.

He thought about ignoring the car and going to the station by taxi, but if Hirose did not realize that Arita had left the hospital, there was no telling how many more hours he would wait. That made him feel bad. If he talked to him, he would certainly offer him a ride home, and he thought it would be annoying to refuse him. But he told himself that there was no other way and went towards the white car.

However, there was no sign of a person in the car that he had approached. Maybe he was tired of waiting and he was wandering around the surrounding area. That's even better. He could just write a note and stick it to the front window. He sighed with relief that he could end this without facing Hirose. But when he took out a notepad and started to write against the side window,

Arita's heart sunk.

Hirose was in the car that he thought was void of human presence. He had tilted his seat back and was staying still. An open magazine covered his face. He must have been reading it while waiting for Arita, and had fallen asleep.

Hirose shifted and his movement made the magazine flutter to the floor. He slowly opened his eyes. Sleepy eyes focused on Arita's face. His lips moved a little, but he couldn't hear what he was saying. Hirose slowly sat up and lowered his side window.

"Are you done with your visit?"

"...Yeah."

"Then shall we return? Get in."

Arita did not say anything. He couldn't flat out refuse him. Hirose tilted his head at Arita's uncertain attitude.

"Do you have other business to take care of? Then I'll wait."

"I'm done now."

"Then let's go back. Please get in."

His smile made Arita uncomfortable.

'If you don't forgive them.'

He suddenly remembered his uncle's words. If he parted here and went home by himself, he thought he would feel even worse than if he went home with Hirose. Hirose also had to go home anyway, and... He something to apologize about. Arita lightly nodded and went to the passenger's seat. He opened the door.

Chapter 4

After about an hour of drive, the car came out to seaside road. For next 30 minutes, the same scenery will pass them by. The asphalt road was still dark with moisture, but there wasn't one piece of rain cloud left in the sky.

"It suddenly stopped raining. When I opened my eyes the sky was blue and Mr. Arita was standing next to me, so I was surprised."

Hirose did not speak one word to Arita for the last hour since the car started moving, but he finally spoke to him. When Arita did not say anything, he paused for a while before continuing.

"The weather became nice from the west side, so... It's great that it cleared up."

He couldn't refuse to talk out of sheer stubbornness. He felt bad not saying anything, so Arita

answered him.

"...That's true."

"The bad weather made my feelings go down, too. If it had been a nice weather from the beginning, the ocean would have been so much more beautiful... Oh, I'm sorry." Hirose bit into his lips. "I'm sorry; that was insensitive. You're not in the mood for that, Mr. Arita."

Silence again. If he didn't reach out to him, it felt like Hirose would not talk to him again.

"My uncle's condition wasn't as bad as I thought, either."

"Oh, really...? That's good to hear."

Hirose let out a sigh, as if relieved. He realized that Hirose couldn't even ask him how the patient was doing, because he was being overly considerate. Perhaps he thought that if he asked, Arita would yell at him and say that it's 'none of hi business.'

Suddenly Arita shifted his gaze to the view outside the window. Contrary to the clear sky, the sea was fuzzy and dull. It had a depressing grey shade.

"If it hadn't rained, the ocean's color would have been a lot more gorgeous. The area around here has quite amazing scenery."

As if answering his gaze, Hirose talked to him. Arita was not familiar with this area. He almost always took the train whenever he visited his Uncle. ...The train did not follow the seaside.

"If you are not in a rush to return, may I stop the car for about 30 minutes?" Hirose asked.

"Sure."

About 5 minutes after that, Hirose stopped the car in a place that Arita had seen before. It was an empty lot next to a closed-up storage place. Behind the storage place, you can see the ocean beyond the levee. He quickly realized that it was the same place where they had stopped the car before on their way to the hospital. I'll be outside just for a second, Hirose said as he started to leave the car. He paused and asked Arita, "I'm going to buy something to drink. What would you like, Mr. Arita?"

"Co... Never mind me."

He started to say coffee, but he stopped. He didn't want to owe anything to Hirose. "Really?" Hirose answered before he lowered his head and got out of the car. Hirose walked to the vending machine, and came back with two coffees in his hands.

"Drink this. If you don't want it... I'll drink the other one later."

Arita took the offered warm coffee. He rotated the can in his hands, as if it was a burden.

"If you don't mind, would you like to come outside, too, Mr. Arita? It feels great."

"I'm okay."

When Arita shook his head, Hirose did not insist any more. He slowly climbed the stairs in the middle of the levee, whose banister half corroded away. When Hirose climbed to about middle of the stairs, he ignored Arita's curious stare that wondered what he was up to and reached up to place one step higher than the levee. He spread out his legs and sat on the stairs, beyond the levee.

Arita thought he was foolishly imitating a little kid, and laughed with the end of his nose. However, no matter how long he waited, Hirose did not return to the car. The turned back on top of the levee did not say anything to him.

What is he looking at? He suddenly wondered. Just what is Hirose looking at so intently? Once the thought entered his mind, he became really curious about what Hirose was staring at. Already he had waited a little more than 5 minutes since the first thirty minutes that Hirose had mentioned. Finally Arita couldn't wait any longer and got out of the car. He circled the car aimlessly once, and then he decided to return to the car right after he confirmed what Hirose was looking at. He started to climb the levee's stairs.

When Hirose realized that Arita was there, he turned and slightly smiled, then moved his gaze back to the ocean. Even when Arita was standing next to him, Hirose did not attempt to talk to him at all, so Arita had no choice but to open his lips.

"...I think you've also stopped your car on our way here. Just what can you see?"

Hirose pointed to the horizon. In the direction he pointed, he could see a little village.

"This area is the deepest part where the river starts. So you can see the entire coastline."

"Oh..."

"This is the only place I can see where my home used to be. I've lived here until when I was a sophomore in junior high school, when we've moved to the city. Can you see the huge building with orange roof across? Do you see it?"

"Oh, you mean that one?"

He focused his gaze.

"It's an elementary school. Beyond that is a small mountain, and my house was on the volcanic plateau right there."

As Hirose said, there was an area with small mountain and volcanic plateau spread out, but it was just a grass area. There wasn't a shadow of a house. He looked around, thinking maybe he was referring to a place further away, but there didn't seem to be any other suitable mountain.

"I don't see anything like a house."

"There is no house. Everything burned up during a fire... So only the place where we've lived remains."

Fire... When he looked back, his eyes met with Hirose's eyes, who had turned to the side. Hirose continued carelessly.

"In the winter of my sophomore in junior high, there was a fire on the back forest that spread to our house. We've noticed quickly and our family quickly evacuated, so nothing huge happened. We didn't have time to bring anything with us, though. Our whole family just numbly stared at the house burning down from far away. Our precious books and photographs all burned away... It was a shock to see the house falling apart, as if it were being eaten up by the fire."

Without realizing it, Arita was paying close attention to Hirose's story.

"They said the reason for the fire was probably because of a cigarette butt thrown away from a car. Our family owned a forest, so it was a huge loss for us for the back mountain to be completely burnt up. My father quickly gave up and said it was a good thing that the house and mountain all burned up, and left to the city where his siblings were."

"It must have been horrible.'

He thought he sounded awkward as he heard his own voice ring against his ears. Hirose gave a small laughter.

"But I think it was better thing for my father. I don't think the hard labor of raising a forest worked out with him too well. Still, it was hard for me to say good-bye to my close friends, so I hated moving."

Hirose crossed his fingers and lifted his arms high, then stretched in a sitting position.

"The apartment that our family rented out in the city was small and stuffy, and noisy as well. The worst thing was that it was so far from the ocean. If the house did not burn down, I might not have became an office worker. I was really looking up to people like surfers."

Hirose was at least twice as slow as others. He couldn't even imagine the word like "surfer" coming from his lips. At such un-matching word, Arita bit down on his lips to stop himself from laughing. When he imagined Hirose with sun-tanned brown hair and golden-brown skin, hugging a surfing board to himself, it became even funnier. Arita couldn't bear it any longer and started to laugh, his shoulders shaking.

"You're laughing at me. How mean," Hirose protested, as if resisting Arita's laughter.

"Well... They say every man has his place. I'm sure God thought that, too."

Hirose rested one hand on his neck while sighing.

"I knew that I had no talent with sports, but... To tell you the truth, I tried out few times, too. One of my friends surfed. But no matter how I tried, I couldn't climb on top of the surfing board.

When I realized that I couldn't do it, I was so sad. But when I got into high school and started to take pictures, I felt a little better while taking photos of surfers and ocean."

The wind suddenly stopped. Cold, salt-saturated wind has been smashing against their cheeks just now, but it quieted down.

"My small dream now is to save up a little and come back here. I'd like to purchase that plot of land and build my house again."

Hirose narrowly opened his eyes, as if pleased.

"If I pass by this road, no matter what, I end up stopping the car. I'm just checking to make sure the scenery that I know did not change."

Arita was born in the city, so he couldn't understand the psychology of going back to his birthplace like Hirose. Even if you were talking about ocean, the most familiar thing to Arita was a huge seaport surrounded by concrete. The sandy beach was more like an amusement park that he would go hang out with his girlfriend.

"...Should we head back now?"

Hirose lifted his waist. Even though he said, should we head back? Hirose's face expressed regret.

"I don't really mind staying a bit longer."

When Arita said that, Hirose smiled at him. "Then just a little longer."

Like a happy child, Hirose intently stared at the ocean.

"What do you see?"

Arita asked without much meaning, since he seemed to be staring at something more than the place he lived at and the sea.

"The blue sky and dark-colored... ocean. Oh, I wish I'd brought my camera with me," Hirose muttered. His eyes contained the ocean's shadow. His regretfully blinking eyes looked like a camera shutter, he thought.

They've talked about many things inside the car. Arita did not start the conversation; he simply responded and listened to the stories, but their "conversation" was flowing. There is no anxiety like the time they were heading to the hospital. He started to learn about the human named Hirose, bit by bit. Hirose did not smoke. When they've parked at the gas station, he took out coins from the ashtray. It wasn't something that a smoker would do. Inside the company, it was "no smoking area" so whoever wanted to smoke had to go all the way out to resting room outside. Some people have quit smoking since that was so bothersome. Arita was one of those people, and he hadn't been smoking for last two years.

Hirose almost never looked at Arita. He was staring in front of him when they were talking,

and of course he had to do that since he was driving, but... Only when the car stopped because of traffic light did he slightly tilt his head sideways. When they had been heading to the hospital, he had been stubbornly staring at the window outside. He thought maybe he over-thought his own significance and became ashamed, so he stared out at the window for a different reason this time. He couldn't look at Hirose in the face.

Outside the window the sun slowly sat and started to approach the horizon. It sank between thin grey clouds, and disappeared into the ocean.

"When I was in college... I've went on several trips to take pictures with my friends."

Arita thought it wasn't polite to listen to him while his back was turned, so he faced Hirose.

"The memory that stands out the most is the time I went to the mountains with my friends from the photography club, in my junior year. We were saying we discovered an awesome swamp and the three of us even borrowed a map to go all the way there. We lost our way and had to sleep outside. Even though it was summertime, it was pretty bad. Next day we managed to climb the mountain all the way to where we heard human sounds, so we figured that we escaped from a very deep forest. But all of a sudden there was a middle-aged lady in her underwear in front of our eyes. The lady gave a grand big shout when she saw us. She went all, EXCUUUUSE MEEE--"

Hirose's speaking face was quite serious.

"...Apparently we stumbled upon an outside hot springs of a motel at the edge of the mountains. Even worse, we've manage to enter the female section. We tried out best to run away, but our legs slipped and we got dunked into the springs. My Olympus camera and lens that I've worked half a year to buy got soaked, too. It was the worst. We couldn't escape fast enough, so we were dragged off to the police station to be questioned... But the policeman felt sorry for us, too. He said it was too bad there were only old ladies there."

Arita burst out laughing. He hurriedly tried to cover his mouth, but he couldn't hide his laughter that spilled out. Even you, Mr. Arita? So mean, Hirose said, exaggerating his pout. He added, It was really horrible that time. His laughter disappeared and stopped, and when he realized it the ocean was already out of sight. The car had moved away from the side road next to the coastline and had entered the main highway that lead to the heart of the city.

"I'm... sorry for today."

He was able to say honest things. Corners of Hirose's lips, who was only showing his profile, swelled up a bit.

"I'm the one who is sorry for being stubborn."

"I'm also sorry for saying all those things to you."

"I don't mind. It was fun for me to talk about many things with you, Mr. Arita."

"Should we go eat something together right now? I'll pay as an apology for today."

Hirose shook his head.

"I've done it because I wanted to, so don't worry about it."

When they stopped speaking, the inside of the car became quiet. Dull darkness and light vibration of the car. Arita had fallen asleep and did not realize that they have arrived at his apartment until Hirose stopped the car and spoke to him.

Hirose's attitude did not change much even after the day that he gave a car ride to Arita. He did not speak out to him unless he had a reason, and he did not do anything like staring at Arita. Arita hatefully thought that Hirose would chase after him more easily since they have talked a lot in the car, but he felt more and more stupid for being on his guard when Hirose remained quiet.

Arita thought it was weird. How could this quiet man so forcefully gave a car ride to Arita...? How could he have taken him and brought him to the hospital when he refused? He vaguely guessed at the reason by his co-worker's comment.

"Good good, you're back to normal. Last week you looked goddamn awful."

His colleague that he sometimes had lunch with at the company cafeteria said when he saw Arita's face.

"Did I really look that bad?"

"Bad? Are you kidding me? Your face looked wane; you looked so tired. Whenever I passed by your pale countenance on the hallways, I worried about when you'll collapse."

"Don't exaggerate," Arita laughed. His co-worker shook his head at him with a serious face.

"I'm not kidding you. It really felt like that."

He suddenly realized by his colleague's mirthless face. Perhaps... Hirose reached out to him even though he knew that Arita was avoiding him, because he couldn't stand to look at how tired he was. He did have some ulterior motives, but... Even so, Hirose did absolutely nothing to Arita. He pathetically worried about Arita and not only did not show any emotions of love, but did not even bring it up in their conversation.

If he did not express it by words or behavior, even if he knew that he liked him, there was no "harm." If he didn't show those feelings, even if for example they talked together, they were just a mentor and student.

Besides, Arita did not dislike the man named Hirose Akihiro. If it wasn't about the romantic feelings he harbored, he was a serious, trust-worthy, and likable type of man. That day he really did cause trouble for Hirose. It felt like a burden but he felt like he had to pay him back. While he worried, he remembered that he offered to have dinner with him. It was eight days after the round-trip to hospital that Arita asked him to a dinner while still hugging the heavy atmosphere of mutually not-speaking.

He had answered the female worker who left with "I'll go on ahead," and Arita looked around

the office to make sure the only two people remaining at the office were he and Hirose. The wall clock was pointing to 8 p.m.

Hirose was concentrating on the computer's monitor and did not seem to realize that they were alone by themselves. Arita hurriedly checked the remaining documents and packed up his things. He lightly sighed. He wasn't sure how to speak to him.

When Arita went to stand next to him, Hirose seemed to notice his presence and lifted his face.

"Good work today."

Easy smile. Arita tried to smile, too, but his nervousness might have prevented him from smiling easily. He avoided the direct eye contact and looked at Hirose's screen from behind his back.

"You're working really hard."

"No... I'm just slow."

It felt uncomfortable for a silence to fall between them, so Arita hurriedly rambled.

"Last time you went through the trouble of picking me up. It's a bit weird to say this is as a thanks, but won't you have dinner with me? I'll pay. When are you free?"

Hirose turned to face him and cocked his head, as if uncomfortable.

"I'm fine. Don't worry about me that much."

"Well, I don't feel comfortable."

"I'm really okay."

Arita didn't know what to do at unanticipated turn of events. He thought if he asked, he'd accept after refusing once. However, Hirose strongly refused.

Last time, when they were talking about many things in the car, Hirose might have grown to hate him and lost interest in him. That was the kind of development he would wish for, but he couldn't honestly be happy if he thought the reason was because of his hysterical behavior.

"You don't want to have dinner with me?"

Hirose hurriedly shook his head at the question.

"It's not the kind of reason like I don't want to, or anything like that. But if I make you worry about things like that, it becomes a burden for me, too..."

Arita couldn't read Hirose's emotions by his expression or words. He wasn't sure if he really

thought that, or if he found Arita annoying. Hirose lightly tapped and made sounds with his fingers on top of the mouse.

"...Tomorrow, I will finish my work faster. I don't want some kind of treat as a thanks, but if you just want to have dinner together, I'll be happy."

"Tomorrow?"

"Will that be okay?"

He looked at him as if stealing a glance at him. Arita avoided his eyes and pumped Hirose's shoulders.

"Okay, then tomorrow."

He slowly walked out of the office so that it'd look natural. Arita breathed in and out. And he was surprised to find his palms sweaty. He didn't think he'd be so nervous.

As promised, the next day, Arita and Hirose ate together after work. It was a horrible weather with drizzling rain starting from the morning, so he had been hoping that the weather would clear by the time they got off work. However, the thick cloud had no intention of dispersing, and it ended up raining the entire day.

It was a thin and weak rain, so Arita had a folding umbrella, but he didn't want to bother to take it out so he walked without it. However, the feeling of his body gradually getting soak was surprisingly cold, so by the time they got to the store, his body had completely froze.

They compromised to pay for their own meals beforehand, but Arita had no intention of letting Hirose pay. He said anywhere that Hirose wanted was fine, and Hirose went to a tiny bar a little place away from main street. At first Arita thought it was a boring store at the simple, tiny interior, but later he realized that Hirose frequented this place.

They did not have much items on the menu, but everything that they ordered was delicious. The elderly store owner was a very friendly man, and Arita drank a bit of alcohol offered to him. His feelings softly loosened.

"It's very unusual for Mr. Hirose to bring anyone with him."

He had given them squid with bean paste sauce as an extra service, and his showed tiny wrinkles around his eyes.

"He'd always eat quietly by himself."

When Arita stole a glance at his profile, Hirose was shyly laughing. They didn't really have a conversation per se. However, until Arita returned to his apartment and took a bath, then went to bed, he felt really, totally great. It felt like his anxiety and upset feelings before he went for dinner were all a lie. The feeling of being lightly drunk and thinking about the small talk they had from the bar to home all felt good, like echo of piano keys being struck with one finger.

Chapter 5

Arita couldn't forget about the delicious food at the bar that Hirose dragged him to, so he headed for the tiny side road on his way back from work. He pushed back the *noren* (the piece of cloth that they drape in front of the store) and entered. The inside wasn't full of people. When he sat at the counter, the owner seemed to have recognized Arita's face, since he smiled and started to talk to him.

"Are you alone today?"

"He still has some work left."

When he ordered several dishes, they came out one by one in front of him. While he sipped at the Japanese wine, he ate pieces of dry side dish. He slowly tasted them. Not even 10 minutes after Arita took his seat, the door slid open and the owner's voice landed in his ears.

"Welcome, Mr. Hirose. Your mentor is here, ahead of you."

When Arita quickly looked back, his eyes met with Hirose's surprised face. Hirose started to head for another seat while standing at the entrance, but the owner placed a hand-wipe and water glass next to Arita before he had a chance to move.

Hirose slowly approached Arita and asked, "Could I seat next to you?"

"Go ahead," he answered. He can't even say that he wished Hirose didn't come. It was Arita's fault for sauntering into Hirose's favorite store. Of course they'd bump into each other.

Hirose seemed to notice Arita's thorny atmosphere, since he only talked to the bar owner.

"I'm thinking about heading to Kakisane(カキ桑) this time. Ice might have frozen at Kamijoike(カミヨイケ) by now."

"That's true... Have you ever seen Mr. Hirose's pictures?"

The owner suddenly changed the topic, startling Arita. His gaze met with Hirose's.

"No, I haven't."

"Do you see that snow photograph there? The *kazabana*(カザバナ, the snow that is floating on a bright day, like flowers)? Mr. Hirose has given that to me."

On the interior of the store, there was a enlarged photograph about size of a notebook, inside a wooden frame. It was a mystical photograph of snow powder dancing on a bright blue sky.

"What a gorgeous photo."

"Of course."

"Haven't... we talked enough about photographs?"

Hirose tried to interrupt, looking uneasy. However, the owner did not stop talking.

"Thanks to Mr. Hirose, I bought a camera, too, but it was quite complicated. I couldn't take wonderful pictures like Mr. Hirose."

The owner was called away by a woman who was probably his wife, and disappeared to the insides of the kitchen. When the owner disappeared, there was only unnatural silence between the two.

Arita looked at Hirose's photograph hanging inside of the store. Long time ago, when he was so young that even his memory was vague, Arita saw snow falling from a brilliant cerulean sky. Lead by his mother's hand, he walked and thought that the brightly sparkling bits of snow was like a present from the heavens.

"Does *kazabana* fascinate you?"

Hirose asked that.

"No, I just feel like I've seen it before."

For about an hour they drank together, and left the store at the same time. Their way home was the same direction so they walked side by side, but for some reason, it felt awkward. Last time he could pass it off as "returning thanks," but he couldn't avoid the meeting this time.

"I have several pictures of *kazabana*. I will bring it to you next time."

"It's okay."

When Hirose stopped, Arita couldn't just keep going, so he had to stop, too. He scratched his neck at the awkwardness of it all.

"No matter what a nice guy you are, I don't think it's going to work. Photographs and all the other things... It's meaningless," Arita spat out.

"Will it annoy you if I bring you the pictures?"

"No... What I want to say is, it's not going to be effective."

Hirose smiled.

"I know I can't do anything, and I'm not trying to slyly hit on you. As long as you enjoy the pictures I took at least a bit, that will make me happy. Could you just bear with me being selfish a bit more?"

3 days later, there was an unlabeled manila folder on Arita's desk.

Inside the folder were about 10 scenic photographs, starting with one of *kazabana*. When Arita returned to his apartment, he stared at them. Inside there was also photo of a surfer, so Arita couldn't help but laugh at little.

The next day, Arita thanked Hirose. Hirose said he wanted to show him the pictures he took when he was travelling overseas. Hirose opened the album at the bar, and busily told Arita about the time he visited India. Arita vaguely thought that he wanted to travel to India, too.

It was around that time that after work, they often went to that bar if their time worked out. They both lived alone, and it was bothersome to cook so everyday they stopped by the store.

If they missed each other at work and headed to the store separately, they'd often bump into each other. At that time, Hirose looked very happy. He'd shyly smile and sit next to Arita, as if that was expected of him. In the reverse case, Arita sat next to Hirose, too.

Sometimes, his little brother would call him. He'd carelessly, but surely ask at the end, "How are they?" Arita would answer to the question without a specific noun, "They're fine." After his little brother was reassured that Arita and their parents were fine, he'd be relieved and hang up.

A day after he had gotten such a phone call, Arita saw Hirose's face and remembered. Hirose said he "liked" him. However, Hirose was different from his little brother's boyfriend. He knew what was acceptable, and he did not expect anything from Arita. Even though they were together, there wasn't even one whispered sweet talk. They would just talk. Arita didn't dislike plain talking, either. When Hirose asked him out for a drive, Arita thought it might be better for him not to go. However, such anxiety quickly dissipated. Hirose seemed to just enjoy going outside, like a elementary school kid enjoying a field trip. While watching enthusiastic Hirose, Arita's nervousness disappeared, too.

Hirose didn't mind driving, and if he wanted to go somewhere, he'd gladly drive for hours. Arita felt bad and drove few times, too. However, Hirose mostly drove. Whenever they left, Hirose would put the big camera bag on the back seat.

When they have arrived at their destination, the first thing that Hirose would do is to take the camera out. It was a heavy-looking camera that gleamed black. When they went to a faraway place for the first time and Arita seemed fascinated by Hirose's hand movements, he proudly showed him a large lens about 6-7 centimeters in diameter.

"This is the Olympus lens that I told you about before that fell into the hot springs," he said. Arita laughed until his stomach hurt. He would happily walk with his tripod and large camera by his side, and if he found a place that he liked, he would stop and take photographs.

When Arita said he wanted to "try taking a picture," Hirose let him, and got it developed for him. His collection of photographs of sky, ocean, and mountain grew. It was bothersome to organize them in an album, so Arita stuffed them into a suitcase. Sometimes, he would remember to take them out and go through them. Some of the photos were of Arita.

Because of Hirose's influence, Arita started to long for a camera, too. However, it was somehow embarrassing to ask Hirose about it, so he circled camera stores and collected pamphlets by himself. He should buy one and surprise Hirose by suddenly taking it out in front of him, he thought. The thought made Arita excited.

Hanging out with Hirose wasn't as a burden as going out with a woman. No matter where they went, they would pay for their own meals, so he liked it.

Hirose also didn't act on his whim. Arita haven't given anything to Hirose, and Hirose didn't expect anything from Arita.

"Recently, I've been together with you so often, Mr. Arita... So girls are asking me things about you. It's awful. They'd ask what your hobby is, whether you have a girlfriend..."

"Oh, that's really bad, Hirose. It's your rival. Did you tell them things about me?"

Arita playfully asked back.

"Of course not. I just beat around the bushes and told them I couldn't tell them anything. I don't want any more rivals."

Hirose would reply, laughing. It was a usual conversation at the bar. They were able to joke around like that. Meanwhile winter passed by, and the season approached end of February. Arita's 30th birthday was just around the corner.

One cold morning, it snowed before early spring. He entangled his fingers and rubbed the freezing ends. As Arita got into the elevator, he happened to ride with the team director. The team director said he had been looking for Arita, and called him away to his office. He wondered what it was all about. It turned out to be talk about sending off one of their seasoned workers to their main office at Tokyo this coming April for training purposes.

"I'm thinking I'd send one from either the sales department or the clerical department, but I wonder who would be good. It's for workers who has been working for 5-6 years. I think Sakai, Takami or Hirose would be good choices."

"That's true..."

Arita had this training before, too. The work was hard, but it was fun, so he enjoyed himself. It was a great program that reflected on his resume, too, so it had a positive effect on his career. Arita didn't hesitate.

"Wouldn't Hirose be good? He works hard, and he's responsible."

"True, I've already asked around... I was thinking about either Sakai or Hirose. If you say that, maybe I'll push for Hirose."

Team director closed the document pile that he was going through. He didn't think that he recommended him especially because they were good friends. Arita thought even if he had to push it, he wanted to send Hirose away on this training. He might get lonely, but the training was only for one year. If this would have a big impact on his climb up the ladder, Arita thought he wanted Hirose to go, even by force. That was his honest feelings.

————— Hirose looked down. They were often silent together, but today there was a "dark" atmosphere that made him hard to approach. It was unusual for him to order two bottles of alcohol at his favorite bar. With a depressed face, he was sipping the drink by himself.

He thought Hirose was different from his usual self, and he found him weird. However, he felt he couldn't force the topic out of him as long as Hirose remained silent, so Arita quietly drank

along with Hirose.

"Team director called me over today."

Arita titled his head. Hirose's face was next to him, who had stained ends of his eyes with red. He pulled at the neck tie around his neck and sighed.

"They're saying... they'd send me off to a training program at the main office at Tokyo. They said it's already been decided."

"Oh..." Arita answered him as if it was his first time hearing about this.

"It's only for seasoned workers, you know. That's great; congratulations. I went, too, but it was pretty fun, and you have absolutely nothing to lose from this. It's heavily reflected upon you when you're being promoted, too."

"I don't really care about being promoted..." Hirose spat.

Arita wrinkled his brows. Arita decided against telling Hirose that he had "recommended" him. It was embarrassing to be seriously thanked about it, and he didn't want people to think he was playing favorites. He thought Hirose was sensitive about things like that. But he would never think in a million years that instead of being thanked, he would hear this kind of complaints.

"You should be more glad about this. There are some people who want to go badly, but can't."

"It's not welcomed, so I can't be glad about it," Hirose abruptly said.

"I can't believe you. What is your problem?" Arita pushily asked, since he was upset about going through the trouble of helping Hirose out. Not fun. Hirose stole a glance at Arita's expression, then he dropped his head. Uncomfortable feeling spread like smoke. Arita placed his lips against the alcohol cup. The inside was empty. When he lifted the alcohol bottle, it was surprisingly empty, so he lightly shook it back and forth. No liquid sloshed inside. He wondered if he should order more and placed the empty bottle back on the table. His eyes met Hirose's eyes, who had lifted his head up again.

His heated gaze seemed to touch him. From his hair, to his cheeks, to his neck, to the ends of Arita's fingers that still clutched at the alcohol bottle.

"...Hirose."

He felt suffocated, like his neck was being choked. Arita desperately squeezed out his voice. When his name was called, Hirose pressed his face with his fists.

"I must be a bit drunk. I was spacing out... I'm sorry."

Outside, a stormy gust blew. The strong rain and wind that he couldn't see seemed like it would blow away the umbrella, so like a shocked child, Arita felt himself shriveling up into tiny bits.

Hirose was staring at Arita through fingers covering up his face. His teary eyes gazed at

nervous Arita.

"I am so happy every day. I can't tell you how fun it is to go to work, and to have dinner and talk together after work... It's like every time we decide to go away for a while together, and I get so excited like a kid that I can't go to sleep. I know you don't have special feelings towards me, Mr. Arita, and I know you hate things like that, but..."

Hirose placed both his elbows on the table, and rested his chin on his fists. He silently glared at the table top.

"So pathetic..." he muttered in a tiny voice. Hirose lifted his face and widely smiled. But it was a weird expression that looked like he was smiling while crying.

"... I did stop by the main office once before. The scale was totally different. And you say that it was fun, Mr. Arita, so I have high expectations. It'll be best to experience many things right now, after all." His strong voice sounded completely different from before.

"Well... That's true."

"The rent must be pretty expensive there. I wonder if it'll be okay? I want to bring my car with me, but the parking fee must be outrageous, too."

"There is a dormitory..."

"Oh, right. That's... good."

Hirose lapsed into a silence, and Arita didn't say anything, either. People that surrounded them chattered on and on, but the two of them remained quiet.

They separated at the familiar road. At that time Hirose's alcoholic influence wore off, so he apologized to Arita, I'm sorry for saying weird things.

"I'm not really worrying about it."

Arita knew that Hirose gave out a relieved sigh at those words.

When he came back, as always, he drew a hot tub and took a bath. While washing tips of his toes, Hirose's face swam into his consciousness. He breathed out while dipping his whole body in the hot water. He placed a towel on his forehead and closed his eyes.

Hirose apologized for saying that it was a pleasure to meet with him. He wasn't happy at all, but in the end Hirose forced himself to look as if he was pleased about the training program. And that weird gaze.

"I love you, so I don't want to be away from you. It makes me unbelievably happy to meet you, so I don't want to go away to a training program."

Essentially Hirose's attitude told him that. Arita slid down and sunk down so that end of his nose touched the water. If you're describing it that way, I'm lonely when I can't meet you, too. But there is no other way, since this is work. He muttered in a tiny voice to himself. Something felt

weird so it made him angry. He hurriedly came out of the bath.

He changed to his pajamas and walked to the refrigerator to get himself a can of beer. He sat at the edge of the bed and poured the whole thing into his system. He tried to watch the TV news, but his head felt like it was up in the air. He kept catching himself thinking about Hirose.

And then today, they got on the same train on their way to work. Arita was the first one to notice him. For some reason he couldn't fall asleep, so all night he couldn't get any sleep. His lack of sleep made him almost late for work, and he managed to catch the train just in time.

The train was completely chaotic, and even though Hirose was less than 3 meters away, Arita didn't recognize him at first. But his head shot out above other people's heads, so he wondered if it was Hirose, and it did indeed turn out to be him. Hirose was clinging onto the handle while dozing. His head nodded back and forth. His eyes opened whenever the train stopped and roughly shook, and then he would hurriedly lift his face. Then he would start nodding again. It was funny to watch him, so Arita couldn't tear his gaze away.

Hirose suddenly turned back, as if someone had tapped on his shoulders. His eyes met the blank gaze. The sleepy eyes happily danced with laughter at Arita.

"Good morning."

He forced his way through the full train, and apologized to people that he had pushed out of the way. Hirose stood next to Arita. "You're a bit late today. Did you oversleep, too, Mr. Arita?"

"...I couldn't stop reading a book, so I went to bed late."

"Which book?"

He had hurriedly lied because he couldn't say that he had trouble sleeping because of thoughts about Hirose. Arita paused, unable to answer, while his eyes scanned the train advertisements.

"... Zero's Laws."

"Mera Scatmire*? I didn't know you read mystery novels, too, Mr. Arita. I wouldn't think you'd read them."

Hirose shifted his head, as if he read Arita's immediate regretful expression at lying.

There was a huge shaking, like an earthquake. The train suddenly stopped. His body got pushed forward, and Arita smashed his head right against Hirose's nose.

"Ouch!"

Hirose grimaced. Arita hurriedly tried to straighten his body that directly leaned against Hirose, but people pushed against him from the back, so he couldn't even move.

"I'm sorry, are you all right?"

"Yes... I wonder what happened."

Hirose didn't even bother trying to lift his arm to press down on his nose. Once again, Arita grabbed Hirose's elbows and supported his arms, trying to pull his body away from Hirose's body. However, it was impossible.

Across the shirt, their skin touched. They felt each other's warmth being diffused across.

"... We apologize for any inconvenience. Currently, on top of the rail..."

The announcement stated that someone had left their car on top of the train track, so they had stopped the train to get the car towed away. They had to stay like this for five or ten minutes. Arita gave up pulling away from Hirose and stiffened his body.

If he faced front of him, they had to stare at each other's face, so Arita turned his face a bit to the right side. He suddenly realized that Hirose's neck gave off a fragrance.

"Hirose, you're wearing a perfume or something?"

"A bit."

He had never met a guy who worried about how he smells, so it was a surprise. When Arita lifted his face, he met troubled gaze.

"When my sister was travelling abroad, she bought it for me as a gift. She said I had to be at least a little more fashionable. At first I was forced to wear it, but nowadays I grew to like it."

"Oh... What's it called?"

"It was a weird name. It was a German brand, so it kind of sounded like a physicist's name..."

Someone pushed his back. The train was stopped so there was no point in moving, but there were still people who tried to move around. He was strongly pushed against Hirose's chest, and a stiletto heel stepped on Arita's right foot.

Arita wrinkled his face and unconsciously pushed his right foot forward, as if running away. Probably both parties realized at the same time that it was a dangerous situation. Arita didn't know what to do about his thigh that split Hirose's legs and pressed against him. He tried to shift his legs, but his right leg was blocked by wall of legs and couldn't be pulled back.

"Mr. Arita, please don't move around so much..." Hirose sounded like he wanted to cry, so Arita stopped moving. Arita felt it, too. Hirose's that was pressed against his thigh was hardening.

"I'm sorry..." Arita apologized without a thought. Hirose had turned his head away, and didn't say anything. Arita didn't say anything, either. The fragrance of perfume still lingered at the end of his nose. Their chests that were pressed together felt hot, and ends of his fingers that were grabbing Hirose's elbows felt hot, and the hardened feeling pressed against him felt hot as well.

He felt shiver running down his spine. Arita also knew that it wasn't because he was disgusted with the object pressing against him. If men... got naked and held each other, how would it feel?

He thought about that, and his earlobes suddenly got hot.

The train started moving again. When they arrived at the next station, Hirose got mixed with surrounding people and walked ahead of Arita. Even though they have arrived at their station and they were walking to the office together, Hirose held his head down and did not say anything.

"I'm sorry," Arita called few times to his back, but Hirose only shook his head.

"I'm the pervert here."

Hirose muttered while biting down on his lips, right before they entered their company. All day, the words rang in Arita's ears.

Chapter 6

Hirose started to avoid Arita. Arita felt uncomfortable, too, but it seemed that Hirose felt awkward beyond that, so it was difficult to talk to him if he didn't have a good reason to.

Arita thought he had to do something to resolve this, so he invited Hirose out to dinner or for a trip, but Hirose refused with round-about excuses.

They drifted further apart every day, and he wanted to do something about it, but he couldn't. At the end, Arita became angry, too. He reached out to him so much, he thought. Arita grew stubborn and didn't talk to Hirose, either. He'd make promises to go on a trip with another friend right in front of Hirose, as if rubbing it in his face. However, Hirose's side had no response.

A month later, Hirose got an official summons. His training at main branch located in the city for one year, starting from April, was decided.

Hirose's good-bye party took place a day before he had to depart. It was also end of the accountant year, so it was insanely busy within the department. It was simply impossible to make some time for the meeting if it wasn't right before his departure.

They first met at a bar, and moved to a karaoke place. Arita hesitated a bit, but he tagged along to the second location as well. He didn't get to talk to Hirose that much at the first location, so it bothered him to just say good-bye this way. However, Hirose drank too much at the first location and collapsed, so in the karaoke place the only thing he did was to hug his flower bouquet and sleep on a corner chair.

Even though he talked to him, he didn't even give coherent responses. Arita forced himself to sing, even though he was horrible at it, so he became upset. The party finally seemed to end when the day nearly ended. Arita was going the same direction as the passed-out Hirose, so he walked with Hirose draped over his back. They got on a taxi together. Hirose seemed to have trouble even sitting properly, since when they were seated he hugged Arita's knees and fell asleep. Arita was speechless.

When the tax stopped at front of Hirose's apartment, Arita paid and dragged Hirose out of the taxi.

Hirose didn't seem willing to walk at all. It seemed impossible to drag him up the stairs, so

Arita leaned Hirose in a sitting position against the apartment wall, and sighed.

"Uh... Mr. Arita."

Hirose slowly opened his eyes and shook his head, and finally said something that resembled a human's speech. He blankly stared at Arita.

"There, I brought you all the way to your apartment. You can climb the stairs by yourself, right?"

As if hurrying Hirose who didn't even attempt to get up, Arita pulled at his hand. Hirose didn't move. He lowered his head and scratched at his cheek with ends of his fingers.

"How... did I end up back home? Oh... I sold this apartment and gave the keys away, too. I was supposed to stay with my college friend tonight..."

Arita felt his energy draining. He deeply sighed.

"So where is the apartment of this friend of yours."

"Near Sanku Station..."

"It's complete opposite direction! We can't do anything about it now. We can't catch a taxi unless we're at the station, so we'll have to walk all the way there."

At Arita's seemingly angry voice, Hirose curled up his shoulders, as if intimidated.

"I'm sorry for troubling you. I can go by myself. You should go back home. You have work tomorrow, too."

"I can't trust words of a drunk. I won't be able to even sleep in peace until I get you on a taxi, so I'll take you there."

Hirose walked by himself, with more firm steps than before. They silently walked side by side on a neighborhood void of people. Sometimes they heard a dog barking in the distance. "Mr. Arita."

His name was called so he stopped and looked at him. Hirose was quietly looking at Arita. His eyes were red. It was eyes of an intoxicated man.

"...I love you."

He didn't feel the same disgust he felt when he first heard it. Perhaps it was because he knew more than enough about Hirose's feelings now.

"Is that so."

Arita quietly replied.

"Just once is enough. Please let me kiss you."

He was looking at him with serious eyes. He felt like floating at unexpected words, and his heart felt a little excited. He had to say something, but what should he say? Something so that Hirose wouldn't get hurt... But what could he say to convince this man? Then how about letting him kiss him just once? It wasn't even a big deal. And if Hirose would be satisfied with that.

He felt people approaching. Two young men, around high school age, were walking towards them. Arita grew anxious. Maybe they'd think it's weird that two men are staring at each other on the middle of the road.

"Don't say stupid things and walk straight."

Hirose quietly looked at Arita with eyes that looked like a child who got yelled at. As if it was final, he lowered his head.

"Yes."

They started to walk again. When Hirose got on a taxi at the station, he left a common parting words of, "Stay healthy."

Arita also had nothing to say except common words like, "You stay healthy, too."

It was 2 AM in the morning when he got back to his room. When Arita returned, he plopped down on the couch and stared at the shapes on the ceiling. Hirose is gone. It wasn't a big deal, and he'll return after one year. He realized that he became strangely emotional and strongly shook his head. He shouldn't be spacing out. He'll be in trouble tomorrow if he didn't quickly bath and go to bed.

Arita managed to stand up from the couch to take a bath. However, his feet didn't manage to take him all the way to the bathroom. He stopped right in front of the bookshelf.

There was a large file case inside the bookshelf. When he grabbed it and opened it, the contents spilled out to the floor.

Mountain of photos that he didn't manage to organize. He picked them up, one by one. Pictures that Hirose took. Mountain and ocean, river and sky. Few photos of Arita. He put them away in the case. There was just one picture of Hirose.

Arita took that picture after borrowing the camera from Hirose. The camera was heavy, so the shutter shook. Hirose's smiling face was smeared and out of focus. Come to think of it, he couldn't see Hirose's smiling face today. No, Hirose had been smiling all this time. But... He just didn't smile for him...

When he was looking at the pictures, he wanted to meet Hirose for no reason. They had been walking together just now, and he had nothing special to tell him, so he himself had no idea why he wanted to see him all of a sudden. Next time they would meet is one year later. Arita suddenly became angry so he tore up Hirose's smeared picture and threw it away. He ripped up every single scenery picture from the mountain of photos, too.

Arita couldn't figure himself out as he threw away the torn pieces and wondered why he was being so stupid. Come to think of it, didn't he do the same thing before? At that time...

"That's not even funny..."

His windows creaked from the bluster of wind. He didn't feel like bathing, either, so he decided to go to bed. He walked towards the window and confirmed that it was locked. He started to pull the curtains closed and happened to look outside. He thought he saw a person's shadow.

Arita doubted his eyes. His eyes met the shadow's gaze. The shadow lowered his head and slightly held up one hand.

"Are you stupid or something?"

At Arita's furious voice, Hirose awkwardly lowered his shoulders. He looked exactly same as the time they parted, so it certainly looked as if he came right back without going to his friend's house.

"Somehow, I just wanted to see Mr. Arita's face one more time... I thought it would be impossible to see you again before tomorrow morning, but it's good thing that I saw you again so quickly." He seemed scared, but Hirose said such nonchalant things, so Arita didn't even have the energy to get mad.

"Anyway, step inside."

"Oh, no, I'll be leaving now."

Hirose shook his head and smiled.

"I'll come back whenever I'm on a break, so please hang out with me. It's okay if it's just until you get a girlfriend, Mr. Arita... So please stay by my side."

His heart hurt. It was stiff, throbbing pain. Arita seriously thought that he wanted to tightly hold this pathetic, sad tall man's lowered face and kiss him.

"I didn't even give you a good-bye gift."

"That's fine. I'll just accept your feelings."

He grabbed Hirose's shirt's sleeve. Hirose suddenly lifted his lowered face. Arita looked into Hirose's eyes, too. Sweet, kind eyes.

"Anything... Tell me what you want."

Smile disappeared from Hirose's face. His face became so serious that Arita felt scared looking at him.

"I want your kiss."

The heart that touched his shoulder was beating hard. His back was pulled forward and hugged, so Arita wrapped his unsteady arms around Hirose's back. They were only hugging, but guilty conscience played a role so he felt so embarrassed that his face felt like it will catch on fire.

However, their touched bodies felt warm beyond that.

Even though it was middle of the night, for two men to stand on the road like this... and hug was not normal. However, he wanted to tightly hug Hirose today, even ignoring that kind of moral. When Arita didn't refuse, thin lips covered his own. It felt like he would become dizzy from the heat emanating from the touching lips. The kiss that only consisted of lightly touching and slightly changing the angle. Tip of Hirose's tongue finally touched Arita's lips lightly, so Arita opened his lips as if dragging him in.

He didn't know exactly how long they stayed like that. It felt like Hirose was starting to pull away, but Arita wanted to kiss him more, so he clutched at Hirose's sleeves as if begging him. However, Hirose's desire to pull away was stronger.

"I'm still a bit drunk."

Hirose placed his hands on Arita's shoulders and muttered, as if apologizing. Arita thought to himself that *he* wasn't drunk. "I'm sorry, being selfish like that."

He didn't want an apology. He didn't allow him to act selfish, either.

"Then, later..."

Ends of hands that gently caressed his shoulders regretfully pulled away. At the departing back, Arita couldn't say anything for a while. He numbly stared at his back.

"Hirose."

His voice that called out to him and stopped him was strangely high. The back had walked away a fair distance, but stopped and turned back. Even though he called out to him, Arita didn't know what to say, nor how to say it.

"When you arrive there, call me the first thing."

"Sure."

Loud voice.

"If you're going to come back here, you have to call me beforehand."

"Yes, of course."

Hirose was slightly laughing. While laughing, he disappeared from Arita's view.

Arita was spacing out on the middle of his room. He couldn't believe that just now, he had been standing on the road, kissing Hirose. But it wasn't a lie. The erotic feeling remained on his lips.

Something was wrong. He was making some kind of mistake. It wasn't normal to kiss with a man. Arita pressed his hand against his forehead. He wasn't like his little brother. He wasn't the type of man to get excited over another man. He just felt sorry for Hirose. He just thought the

man who tagged after him, saying he "loves" him, was pathetic and sad. He had no other intention.

However, if Arita didn't speak that way, Hirose wouldn't have thought to kiss Arita. He definitely invited Hirose to act that way.

Why was Hirose outside? If only he wasn't there, if only Arita didn't realize it, if only it wasn't the middle of the night, he wouldn't have done something like kissing him. And just how, when Arita thought he wanted to meet him, Hirose wanted to meet him also just at the right time?

Within Arita's chaotic mind, there was nothing that answered him. Arita couldn't bear the silence in the room he was alone in, so he turned on the audio player and set the dial to night time radio program.

There was slight other sounds mixed in the pop song that flowed out, sung by a woman's husky voice. The music slowly faded out, and the DJ's voice overlapped it.

"That just now was (Love Times) from Joanna Slapis's 1986 album, <<Yellow Sun.>>"

He sat on the sofa, as if collapsing. This longing feeling, disorganized conversations, himself who became completely unnatural... Arita couldn't run away any longer.

Hirose realized his feelings for Arita over 6 years span of time. However, he was different from Hirose. He's different from that man who needed 36 hours in a day. All Arita needed was one year; that was more than enough.

What the hell do I do. Arita paled and stomped up and down. His brother's problem, his parent's problem... He saw himself pushing everything aside, and floating along.

Arita didn't know how to fight this breathless heat, so all he could do was seat curled up like a little child.